

# Rethinking English Teaching as a foreign language: Introducing slang, colloquialisms and geographical varieties

**Título:** Rethinking English Teaching as a foreign language: Introducing slang, colloquialisms and geographical varieties.  
**Target:** ESO, Bachillerato y Escuela Oficial de Idiomas. **Asignatura:** Inglés. **Autor:** Lucía Carel Aguilera, Licenciada en Filología, Jefa de Departamento de Lenguas Extranjeras.

*"We are students of words: we are shut up in schools, and colleges, and recitations-rooms, for ten or fifteen years, and come out at last with a bag of wind, a memory of words, and do not know a thing"*  
Ralph Waldo Emerson

The complexities of the English language are such that even fluent speakers cannot always communicate effectively, as almost every non-native speaker learns on his or her first day in United Kingdom, United States, Australia or any English speaking country. Magazines, songs, books, TV shows, movies, Internet are for instance binding influences coming from all over the world. Students can watch a British sitcom, an American feature or an Australian soap opera on the same time zone either on TV or Internet. All these bring into a far reaching variety of vocabulary, accents, and other linguistic impacts that they would have been improbable to experience a couple of decades ago. Therefore, how can we motivate our students to write or to speak in English in a such multicultural context taking into account that the official examination papers in Spain do not even contemplate speaking as a part of the test? Which English should we teach in foreign country?

When I started my work life as an English teacher, I noticed how unhappy students were with the English they were learning because it has very little to do with the one they are surrounded by. I did my research using different social networks, I visited websites that they like to look up for new trends and I was struggling with expressions, acronyms and different spellings. I finally understood what they meant. What's the meaning of "you jelly brah?" , not even the word corrector knows the term 'brah'! In fact, it's another way to say "are you jealous" and it's often depicted with a tiny jelly bear. And what about acronyms? What do a Spanish speaker understand when someone says "I'm not into PDA"? In Spanish, PDA



Taken by Lucía Carel in Queen Street West  
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refers to a personal digital assistant as in English. But if the context changes it might mean Public Display of Affection. There is also the case of "ttyl" which stands for "talk to you later". Let's face it: English has changed.

Besides, which English should we teach? American English? British English? Should I say "eggplant" or "aubergine"? Do I live on the "first floor" or the "ground floor"? Confined in national curriculum that hasn't changed in the last twenty years and doesn't contemplate neither the entire multiculturalism of the language nor its current evolution, how can we convince our students that what they're learning at school will be useful for their future?

So, it goes without saying that some change need to be done from all sides. But being realistic, the Education Department will not change the content next year and not even the following year. It's our due as teachers to bring real English into the classroom. Let's introduce some slang, colloquialism, idioms, fun facts about English language in our lessons! We must keep an eye on the acquisition of the compulsory content, of course. However, it's well known that attention do not last more than forty-five minutes. Therefore, instead of fighting against chaos and indiscipline in class because teenagers are tired, bored or eager to go out, let's introduce little pauses in between dense content in which we explain contemporary English and how it has become this way. We should always make clear that this kind of register cannot be used in their exams but it's very likely that they find it in a song, website, magazine or that someone will mention it in a regular conversation. The same works for American, British, Australian, Canadian or any other kind of English variety. Nobody speaks James Bond's English anymore.

In my first year teaching, I used to slow down my speech and try to articulate everything very precisely but how will they be able to manage when talking to other native speakers? I do repeat or slow down from time to time because I know that otherwise my students will have trouble following me. However, the more natural you speak the better they get at listening and speaking.

By adapting our speech to their first understanding, our students are going to have a big shock if eventually they get to try out their English in real-world situations, that is, outside the classroom. For English speakers who are not teachers are not so considerate toward non-native speakers. They will continue at their normal pace and expect everyone to keep up. So if your students are used to us speaking very slowly they won't have a chance of understanding the London taxi driver or the New Yorker barman they meet on their travels.

So is it better to speak at your normal pace? I thought about this when I remember myself as a teenager having the typical grammar problem with the "to" infinitive. I would regularly say, "I want go", forgetting the particle because of the direct translation from my mother tongue language, I decided I would show my students what it sounds in "real" English: "I wanna go" and this will get stuck in their brains because of the songs they listen to or the TV shows they follow. In the real world, native speakers don't pay any attention to the fact that the little word "to" belongs to the following verb, and routinely attach it to "want" so it becomes "wanna". If you taught your students "wanna" first, they would simply add the verb they want and forget about the grammar rules.

The advantage of this is that they will at the same time be practicing spoken English the way natives use it. The brain only retains what is useful in a real-life situation, so if we want our students to improve, or at least to be more motivated to do so, we should adapt the content to what they are more likely to see, hear or speak. Only rarely do adults or teenagers say that they need writing skills more than speaking, and yet we still put too much emphasis on the written composition. It's time for language teachers to teach English in a way that is best going to serve their students in life, and not treat language as a purely academic exercise placed in an exam. ●

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